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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 SUVA 000218

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SUBJECT: FIJI'S NEW MULTI-PARTY CABINET: CONTINUITY AND
SURPRISES

REF: SUVA 214 (AND PREVIOUS)

Classified By: Amb. Dinger. Sec. 1.4 (B,D).

Summary

¶1. (C) Fiji Prime Minister Qarase has named his Cabinet of 24 Ministers, plus 12 Ministers of State. FLP leader Chaudhry plans to be Leader of the Opposition, but his party will take 9 portfolios under a multi-party cabinet provision of Fiji's Constitution. A number of FLP leaders want to give power-sharing a good faith effort. Foreign Minister Tavola retains his job, this time as a Senator, a welcome surprise. Home Affairs Minister Vosanibola also returns, which is bound to give Republic of Fiji Military Forces (RFMF) Commander Bainimarama continued heartburn. See para 5 for a Cabinet listing with comments. End Summary.

Foreign and Home Affairs Ministers continue

¶2. (U) Following quickly from the SDL's narrow election victory last week (ref), Prime Minister Qarase has named 24 Ministers in his Cabinet and 12 Ministers of State (who are not in Cabinet). Several key posts are unchanged from the previous government. In a pleasant surprise, Foreign Minister Tavola, who retired from elective politics, returns to his job as an appointee from the Fiji Senate. He tells us he received the request yesterday and "put away his fishing pole for a bit." Home Affairs Minister Vosanibola, who has clashed repeatedly in the past with RFMF Commander Bainimarama, returns as well. Other senior returnees include Attorney General Bale and Minister of Finance Kubuabola. A couple of previous ministers allegedly tied to the coup of 2000 have been dropped, though another, Ratu Naigama, remains, this time as Minister for Fijian Affairs. Another person reportedly involved in 2000, Adi Samanunu Cakobau (currently High Commissioner to Malaysia) apparently will take a Senate appointment and become Minister without Portfolio.

Labor accepts Cabinet portfolios...in the end

¶3. (C) The Fiji Labor Party (FLP) accepted Qarase's offer of 9 seats in the multi-party Cabinet, after considerable deliberation. FLP leader Mahendra Chaudhry declined a portfolio, wishing to be Leader of the Opposition. Whether it is allowable for him to take the opposition role when his party has accepted Cabinet posts is unclear under the Constitution and could be subject of a legal challenge. We are told Chaudhry's inclination was for the FLP to reject Qarase's offer, even though the portfolios have important Labor-oriented responsibilities; however, a number of senior FLP leaders insisted that the party really must make a good

faith attempt to work with Qarase for the future of Fiji. If down the line things don't work out, so be it; but to decline the offer would offend a hopeful public. Thus, Chaudhry offered a list of nominees with suggested portfolios. When Qarase shifted some names around, Chaudhry had the FLP boycott the formal swearing in this morning, May 23; but shortly thereafter he announced FLP would accept the deal.

Comment

¶4. (C) Qarase named nearly half of Parliament plus three Senators as Ministers or Ministers of State. The multi-party cabinet requirement of the Constitution, plus the debts Qarase owed all 14 Fijian provinces, required such numbers. Having the highly respected Tavola continue in Foreign Affairs will be welcomed throughout the region. The reappointment of Vosanibola to Home Affairs appears a direct slap at Commodore Bainimarama. We hear the Commodore takes some heart from the appointment of Jioji Konrote as Minister of State for Immigration and Ex-servicemen, under the Home Affairs portfolio, since Konrote is a former Chief of Staff of the RFMF and has dealt comfortably with Bainimarama in the past. Still, Konrote is not in Cabinet, and the Vosanibola appointment suggests Qarase is not looking for compromise in his government's effort to resolve friction with the military.

Fiji Cabinet list, with comments

¶5. (C) Prime Minister and Minister for Sugar Reform: Laisenia Qarase. (Qarase has kept the sugar portfolio, an important set of issues for Fiji and one in which he has taken a personal interest.)

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Attorney General & Minister for Justice: Qoriniasi B. Bale. (Bale, the incumbent, is a capable and conservative-nationalist lawyer, who played a major role in drafting the Reconciliation Bill. He has told us the revised bill to be submitted to Parliament soon will be much improved. We reserve judgment.)

Minister for Finance & National Planning: Ratu Jone Y. Kubuabola. (An incumbent.)

Minister for Education, Youth & Sports: Ro Teimumu Kepa. (A female incumbent, and one of the three highest chiefs of Fiji.)

Minister for Tourism & Transport: Tomasi Vuetilovoni. (Former Minister of Commerce.)

Minister for Fijian Affairs, Lands & Provincial Development: Ratu Naiqama Lalabalavu. (Former Minister of Transport, and one of the three highest chiefs of Fiji. He was convicted and served a sentence for obstructing justice during the events of 2000.)

Minister for Fisheries & Forests: Ilaitia Tuisese. (Former Minister of Agriculture.)

Minister for Home Affairs & Immigration: Josefa Vosanibola. (An incumbent, who has had a very rocky relationship with RFMF Commander Bainimarama. See para. 4)

Minister for Information & Communications: Isireli Leweniqila. (Former Minister for Youth and Sport.)

Minister for Public Enterprises & Public Sector Reform: Savenaca Draunidalo. (Former Minister of Works and Energy; former RFMF Colonel; recently implicated in planning for the 2000 coup.)

Minster for Women, Social Welfare & Housing: George Shiu Raj. (Former Minister for Multi-ethnic Affairs, and one of two

ethnic-Indians who won SDL seats in 2006.)

Minister for Multi-Ethnic Affairs & National Reconciliation & Unity: Ratu Meli Saukuru. (A well-liked high chief from Nadi in Fiji's west, with excellent connections to the ethnic-Indian community there.)

Minister for Public Utilities & Infrastructure Development: Robin Irwin. (One of two independents to win seats in 2006; ethnic-British but has been a businessman in Fiji for many years.)

Minister for Environment: Poseci Bune. (Deputy head of the FLP, and Minister of Agriculture in the 1999 Chaudhry government; an ethnic-Fijian who is rumored to be the illegitimate son of the late Ratu Mara; Chaudhry proposed him for Minister of Agriculture, but Qarase made a switch.)

Minister for Labour & Industrial Relations: Krishna Datt. (A former school teacher, trade unionist, and long-time FLP leader, with good connections across party lines; Foreign Minister in 1987; served as a majority floor leader in Parliament in 1999.)

Minister for Curative Health Services: Dr. Gunasagaran Gounder. (A medical doctor; was FLP Assistant Minister for Health in 1999.)

Minister for Agriculture: Gyani Nand. (A former senior official in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs who won an FLP seat in 1999.)

Minister for Energy & Mineral Resources: Lekh Ram Vayeshnoi. (An FLP stalwart from Fiji's west; speaks fluent Fijian; was Minister of Information in 1999.)

Minister for Primary & Preventative Health Services: Udit Narayan. (Won an FLP seat in 1999.)

Minister for Local Government & Urban Development: Chaitanya Lakshman. (A lawyer and FLP newcomer.)

Minister for Employment Opportunities & Productivity: Ragho Nand. (A school teacher. Qarase named FLP unionist Felix Anthony for this portfolio, though Chaudhry had proposed

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Anthony for Labor. In the end Anthony declined cabinet, perhaps in part because his current position as General Secretary of the Fiji Trade Union Congress has better perks,

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which he can retain as an MP but not as a Minister.)

Minister for Commerce & Industry: Sivia Tora. (A new FLP member, who at one time served on the staff of Fiji's diplomatic mission in Australia.)

Minister for Foreign Affairs & External Trade: Kaliopate Tavola. (An incumbent who retired from politics this year, but Qarase plans to name him for the Senate and is bringing him back.)

Minister without Portfolio: Adi Samanunu Talakuli Cakobau. (Currently Fiji High Commissioner in Malaysia and one of Fiji's highest chiefs; she is alleged to have supported the Speight coup of 2000. This appointment via the Senate presumably settles a Fijian political debt. We hear her cabinet responsibilities are still under consideration.)
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